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ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET**

Student: **Michael Higley-Vance**

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EL7008-8

Dr. Linda Collins

Online Learning Communities

Activity #1: Comparing Communities

Comments:

Faculty Use Only

Hi, Michael, your introduction to this paper is an important account of how learning communities are evolving including technologies and e-learning tools that are validated by a variety of resources. You have clearly presented the commonalities and the differences between traditional learning communities and online learning communities. Certainly flexibility is a plus in the online learning community and face-to-face interactions are a plus in the traditional classroom environment. The tools you have

described for online learning communities and collaboration are great examples. Skype is an effective way to communicate and video can be used along with audio making discussions and meetings even more connected. Since Skype is accessed through the internet you can connect to your online learning community from anywhere in the world there is access to the internet. Google Drive is a collaborative tool that is easy to use and free that allows students to share and work on documents, presentations, and other projects collectively and at different times. It is interesting that your research found a variety of advantages to both the traditional and online learning community making the results neutral to which one is better. You discussed newer and improved technologies may change this. Does it also depend on the age and experience of the student whether they prefer one over the other? Do you feel these technologies can also be used in the traditional learning environment to help support and build learning communities? Please see additional comments in the paper. Thanks, Dr. Collins

Dr. Linda D. Collins 6.9 2.8 April 17, 2014

Comparing Learning Communities

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Comparing Learning Communities

A learning community is the sharing of goals, values, and beliefs pertaining to education (Hord, 1997; Kaplan, 2011). Traditional learning communities can still be found in classrooms limited by the tools and resources found within the walls of face-to-face teaching. However, educational institutions are changing exponentially to include information technology rich learning communities (Al-Hassan, n.d.; Bakilana, 2012). The once mainstream approach to classroom instruction is gradually being replaced by a technology driven approach to teaching and learning called e-learning (Harshbarger, 2012). As such, the online learning community will continue to evolve making this method of learning the new normal (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Ladyschewsky, 2004; Varvel, 2004; Wuensch et al., 2008). This paper serves to describe the differences between face-to-face and online learning communities, the process of e-learning, and the instructor's role within an online learning environment. Additionally, example technologies,

which support collaboration and discussion in the online learning environment, will also be discussed.

Traditional vs. Online Learning Communities

Educational institutions from around the world are increasingly using technology for teaching and training (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Ladyshevsky, 2004; Wuensch et al., 2008).

Increased access to information technologies has transformed the world of learning from an environment of sending and receiving written correspondence and playing phone-tag to an age of instant communication. Online learning is the fastest growing method for delivering new information in education today (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Ladyshevsky, 2004; Wuensch et al., 2008). Various e-learning strategies now exist; such as asynchronous teaching, synchronous learning discussions, blended learning, and module-led learning (Sad, Goktas, & Bayrak, 2014; Wuensch et al., 2008). Therefore, it seems appropriate that K-12 learning institutions embrace different forms of online learning to meet the needs of the 21st century student.

To make comparisons between these two methods of educational delivery is difficult because researchers have found little evidence to support a wide range of differences (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Ladyshevsky, 2004; McConnell, 2000; Pai, 2013). Halsne and Gatta (2002) note that it is difficult to make comparisons because although both modes are different and distinct in their methods of delivery the content typically is the same. Advocates of traditional learning modes maintain that face-to-face interaction is far more superior to online instruction because it allows the classroom teacher a better opportunity to engage and motivate students (Bakilana, 2012). However, advocates of online learning modes sustain that e-learning can support the individual learning needs of a more diverse student learning community (Al-Hassan, n.d.; Sad, Goktas, & Bayrak, 2014).

Traditional Learning Communities

Some apparent differences between traditional learning and online learning modes exist, in part, because of a lack in research of online learning communities compared to those in the traditional classroom (Wuensch et al., 2008). The lack of research may impact both teacher and student perceptions on the effectiveness of online learning. Wuensch et al. (2008) notes there are six advantages to traditional learning communities ranging from peer interaction and spatial concepts to assessing authentic student learning. Each one profoundly addresses learning in the traditional classroom environment. Bakilana (2012) notes traditional learning communities consistently give students more valuable educational opportunities. As students synchronously interact with the instructor, students receive opportunities to engage in collaborative group activities and peer interactions (Bakilana, 2012). Moreover, traditional classroom communities provide students with valuable one-on-one opportunities with the instructor and their learning peers.

Online Learning Communities

As with traditional classroom communities there are advantages to online learning communities that traditional classroom environments do not support. Some of the advantages include its convenience, flexibility, and accessibility (Sad, Goktas, & Bayrak, 2014). Varvel (2004) adds that the flexibility afforded to the online learner far exceeds that of the face-to-face learner. Additionally, online learning can address perceived differences through frequent communication between the instructor and student, which can serve to monitor student learning and provide students with feedback (Kaplan, 2011; Mandenach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). Furthermore, online learning does have disadvantages, which include lack of face-to-face time

with an instructor, lack of technology requirements, limited technological support, and the lack of spatial structure (Bakilana, 2012).

The online learning community is constantly evolving as new informational technologies become more refined (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Ladyshewsky, 2004; Varvel, 2004; Wuensch et al., 2008). Both traditional and online learning environments will employ synchronous learning styles, while the fully online learning environment will rely primarily on asynchronous learning techniques (Halsne & Gatta, 2002). Moreover, online learning communities will employ the use of information technologies to master learning objectives in addition to the technology hosting the learning space (Al-Hassan, n.d.; Harshbarger, 2012). Online learning communities intentionally focus on three areas during online learning; the knowledge, practice, and task (Harshbarger, 2012; McConnell, 2000; Sad, Goktas, & Bayrak, 2014). In many ways, face-to-face learning communities are similar to traditional classroom learning environments.

Role of the Online Instructor

The relationship between instructor and student in an online learning environment is paramount (Sad, Goktas, & Bayrak, 2014; Wuensch et al., 2008). Instructors must be open to a variety of learning methods and possess outstanding communication skills (Varvel, 2004). Additionally, Vavel (2004) notes that instructors must communicate often, explicitly stating the course objectives and student performance objectives. According to Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garrett the type and frequency of feedback a student receives is profoundly effective to learning online (2006).

Online learning communities function outside the traditional classroom walls therefore; instructors of online learning environments must be active in the online course in order to maintain student engagement (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). The instructor must

show an interest in the subject matter, concern of the student's learning and provide encouragement. Instructors need to be engaged with student learning communities, and encourage interactions at every opportunity (Kaplan, 2004; Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). When the instructor is engaged and facilitating a positive learning environment, student learning will occur (Wuensch et al., 2008). In many ways, the role of the online classroom instructor is very similar to that of the traditional face-to-face classroom instructor. The ultimate goal of any instructor is to ensure student success. According to Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garrett (2006) student success is possible through an instructor's involvement in the learning community in which he teaches.

Additionally, instructors in the online learning environment must possess strong organizational and time management skills (Wuensch et al., 2008). Instructors should respond to students in a timely manner, and offer assistance to their personal learning process whenever possible (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). According to Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garrett (2006) some instructors have established an online presence by creating learning communities through sites like Wikispaces. Thus, an online presence is essential and can serve to facilitate course management and provide students with considerable assistance.

Supporting Technologies

A one-size fits all approach to online learning does not support online learning communities or their learning process. Every student is different and often requires their individual learning needs addressed, whether that is through encouraging course discussion or permission to use Web 2.0 applications to help demonstrate mastery of learning objectives. The continued advancements in informational technologies are rapidly transforming online learning

communities (Tak-Wai et al., 2006). Thus, the advances in information technologies will continue to expanded student learning opportunities.

Online Resources

There are several Web 2.0 tools and resources, which can meet the needs of online learning communities. Web 2.0 communication tools and resources used by the online student are typically project-based and collaborative in nature (Higley, 2014). Resources described below include Web 2.0 applications used to positively enhance their online learning experiences and demonstrate mastery of the stated learning objectives.

Google Drive. Google Drive is a web-based communication tool, which provides learners and instructors a way to collaboratively create, edit, and share Google documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. The application also includes a web-based editor to create drawings, forms, and fusion tables. These online documents are tightly integrated with other Google App services and provide very powerful real-time collaboration features. These tools can be used with online students to synchronously collaborate on content. Students can also use Google documents to take collaborative online notes, which will help aide in processing and learning content objectives with others.

VoiceThread. Voicethread is a communication tool allows learners to import images into a media presentation with multiple ways to interact. Voicethread offers a limited free account for students and instructors, which can be used to synchronously collaborate on content. Voicethread enhances online communication by providing students and instructors multiple ways to communicate about content via annotations, voice comments, recorded video, and text. The web-based tool allows learners to post questions and comments while interacting with the instruction provided.

Prezi. Prezi is an online presentation tool used to create power point like presentations, which are engaging and informative. This tool allows the learner to include text, images, video, and audio to enhance communication. Online student communities can use this communication tool to demonstrate their understanding of the content or skill.

Wikispaces. Students and instructors can use a wikispace to establish an online working presence where sharing and collaboration are supported. A wiki page allows instructors to share additional resources with students, provide them a place to seek assistance, and to collaborate with peers. Students can use this tool as a place to store and management online course assignments. When students use a wikispace in this way it becomes the student's electronic portfolio. Wikispaces are designed perfectly to visually represent, store, and manage student work, while simultaneously providing a space to demonstrate student-learning objectives.

Skype. Applications like Skype allow instructors and students to interact face-to-face outside the walls of a traditional classroom space. Skype is an inexpensive way to communicate within the online learning environment. In addition to interacting face-to-face with the instructor, Skype provides instructors with opportunities to interact in a cultural exchange of expert information. Finally, using Skype provides learners with an authentic learning experience, applicable to students' lives, and synchronously engaging (Kharbach, n.d.).

Conclusion

There are many documented reasons for why instructors and students believe their online learning community is preferred. The literature discussed here showed an overwhelmingly neutral position on the two learning communities, indicating that neither learning environment had a greater advantage over the other (Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Ladyshefsky, 2004; Varvel, 2004). However, as information technologies and Web 2.0 tools grow the 21st century student

will require a much more engaging and authentic learning experience. In some ways online learning is more difficult than learning in the traditional classroom. Instructors can ensure student success by creating purposefully planned lesson that deliver interactive and collaborative learning tasks, which keep students engaged and motivated to learn (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006; Wuensch et al., 2008). Online instruction can be effective when designed to meet the individual learning needs of the learning community. Finally, effective online instruction happens when the lesson task or performance expectations allow for students to use web-based technologies to demonstrate mastery (Tak-Wai et al., 2006).

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